PDF/A in CM/ECF

What is PDF/A?

PDF/A is an International Standards Organization (ISO) standard document format. It is a subset of the PDF standard which excludes those PDF features that give rise to concerns about security and the ability to archive documents.

Why does the judiciary need to move to PDF/A for its CM/ECF documents?

To reduce security risks and to improve the ability to archive those documents. Since its inception in 1995, CM/ECF has required that documents be filed in PDF format. Over the years, PDF has had many features added to it, and some of those features have created security risks. Formal security audits have pointed out the vulnerability. PDF/A eliminates those security risks and also enhances the ability to archive with the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

When will the judiciary require that all documents filed in CM/ECF be in PDF/A format?

Currently, no deadline has been set. This will be a topic for discussion in the court community over the coming months. Spring 2011 may be a reasonable target date, and courts should begin planning the transition now. Under current plans, each court will decide when it is ready to enforce the requirement.

How does a court allow or require that CM/ECF documents be in PDF/A format?

CM/ECF already accepts PDF/A documents, so nothing needs to be done to allow the filing of PDF/A documents. A court can require that documents be in PDF/A format via the CM/ECF site table variable pdfARequired; the setting determines whether outside filers, court staff, both groups, or neither group must use PDF/A.

How will CM/ECF handle PDF/A exceptions?

Courts can modify or create individual docketing events that allow any filer to submit a PDF document rather than a PDF/A document. This is done in the event dictionary (by setting a new parameter to the "doc" function.) The exception mechanism was included in CM/ECF to handle difficult problems that cannot be solved through other reasonable approaches. The exception approach lets in PDF files that could contain security risks and that don't meet the ideal NARA archival standard, and therefore it should be employed only when truly needed.

What releases of CM/ECF have the features needed for handling PDF/A documents?

All current versions of CM/ECF will accept PDF/A filings. Appellate 4.0 (available 11/2010), Bankruptcy 4.2 (available by early 2011), and District 5.0 (available 09/2010) will incorporate all the PDF/A features, such as the ability to require PDF/A filings, and the production of CM/ECF forms, proposed orders, and other documents in PDF/A.

What does an attorney or court user need to do to create PDF/A documents?

More than ninety commercial products, including word processors, can create PDF/A documents. In most cases, users simply need to update the settings in those products to make PDF/A the default

format. A filer who now uses software that does not support PDF/A will need to acquire a product that does; a free word processor can be downloaded from OpenOffice.org. Please see the PDF/A Creation tab for a more detailed discussion of document creation.

How are hyperlinks in documents affected by the PDF/A requirement?

Many PDF writers create PDF/A documents with active ("clickable") links. Other PDF writers produce PDF/A documents with active links only if the links are unmasked (i.e., the link is a full URL and not a shorthand literal that represents the full URL). See Hyperlinks in PDF/A Documents.

Are there special considerations for using active links in PDF/A documents?

If Version 9 of Adobe Reader or Acrobat is being used to display a PDF/A document, links will not work if the default "PDF/A View Mode" is in effect. A user who wants to use the hyperlinks must disable "PDF/A View Mode", as described in Hyperlinks in PDF/A Documents. Adobe reports that with Version 10 of the Adobe products (and perhaps with a patch to Version 9), this disabling will not be necessary; hyperlinks will be active in PDF/A View Mode.

How can a user create a PDF/A from a scanned document?

Newer scanners (manufactured since 2005 or so) allow users to directly create a PDF/A. Users with older scanners can use a conversion tool such as Acrobat 9 to convert scanned documents to PDF/A. See Creating PDF/A from a scanned document.

Which PDF/A format should filers use: 1a or 1b?

PDF/A 1a is preferred; PDF/A 1b meets the minimum requirement. Users with the option should select PDF/A 1a.

PDF/A files are larger than PDF files. How will CM/ECF handle this?

Initial testing indicates that a PDF/A file may sometimes be significantly larger than a PDF file created from the same source document. This should not be a problem for CM/ECF G6 systems, which were delivered with excess storage capacity. Courts may also use CM/ECF's archiving capabilities to free up additional disk space, if necessary.

How is the use of annotations affected by the PDF/A requirement?

PDF/A documents may be annotated using the CM/ECF "sticky notes" feature and still be compliant. Generally, other annotation tools would also maintain PDF/A compliance.

Will CM/ECF create PDF/A forms?

All three CM/ECF products -- Appellate, Bankruptcy, and District -- will automatically create forms in PDF/A format, without user intervention.

How will the Record On Appeal (ROA) and Appendix functions be affected?

The ROA and Appendix created by CM/ECF will be in PDF/A format, and "live" links will be preserved. Appellate courts will use the ROA and Appendix as they do now.

How does the PDF/A requirement affect data-enabled ("fillable") forms, such as those downloaded from the uscourts.gov web site?

Just as with PDF, fillable forms such as a bankruptcy petition or a credit counseling certificate must be in PDF/A format before they are filed in CM/ECF. A PDF/A can be created by "printing" from the browser - see Creating PDF/A documents with Acrobat.

How does the PDF/A requirement affect court processes that use data-enabled forms with JavaScript?

Documents with "live" JavaScript are not PDF/A compliant. Court processes using such forms do not need to change as long as the documents are not stored as CM/ECF documents.

Can a document produced by bankruptcy's E-Orders be saved as a PDF/A?

The version of E-Orders that is incorporated into the national bankruptcy application (4.2) will produce PDF/A documents.

How does the PDF/A requirement affect EOUST?

EOUST will convert data-enabled forms to PDF/A prior to submission.

How will the PDF/A requirement affect the Bankruptcy Noticing Center?

The Bankruptcy Noticing Center will produce certificates of service in PDF/A format.

How will the PDF/A requirement affect the Forms Modernization Project?

The two efforts are being coordinated, and current indications are that CM/ECF PDF/A compliance will have no adverse effect on the Forms Modernization Project.

How will the PDF/A requirement affect third-party software vendors (e.g., bankruptcy petition and trustee software)?

Third-party software vendors will provide PDF/A documents. Products will be tested prior to any date that the judiciary recommends for requiring PDF/A.

How will video and audio files be handled?

Video and audio files are not PDF/A compliant. However, CM/ECF accepts the upload of digital audio files. The security risk from these files is low because they are loaded by court staff.

How does the PDF/A requirement affect users of StampPDF?

StampPDF documents are not in PDF/A format and must be converted to PDF/A with a product such as Acrobat 9 Professional.

How does the PDF/A requirement affect Mac users?

Microsoft Word 2008 for Mac cannot create PDF/A documents, but can create PDF documents which can be converted to PDF/A. Alternately, a Mac user can install and use OpenOffice, which is available for free; see OpenOffice settings for PDF/A.

Expand all Collapse all